

Listen Up, Officer

Unsolicited advice for India's bureaucrats

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If you run into an IAS officer, who has been in service for say 15 years, here is what you can do for him.

First of all, help him understand this: fifteen years on the job and there is still a lot to learn; learn not just what remains unlearned but also what needs to be unlearned. Encourage him to express his views on the multitude of issues in Indian public discourse. Work with him to learn where his opinions come from. Reveal to him the invisible yet powerful influence of chance experiences, perceived self-interest and ideology, however inchoate. Introduce to him the vulnerability of those views in the face of alternate facts and perspectives. Help him experience the freedom that comes from divesting one's self from one's stated positions. And the gains that follow from understanding alternative viewpoints including those that are not friendly, even hostile.

Help him make sense of the disapproval that greets him often. Ask him to curb the tendency to dismiss it or join it. Tell him that some criticism might be unfair to him but not unfair otherwise. He may be blamed for failures that are rooted in another time, place or area. Or, he may be blamed for failures that are not because of him but despite him. Counsel him to not let such criticism dampen his enthusiasm. Let him understand that some of it is born out of frustration and pain.

Some of it is part of a more widespread democratic discontent. Roots of this discontent may lie in deeper societal and political processes that shape his work environment. Help him understand those processes. Let him learn about the texture of societal relations, its articulation through the rigours of our democracy and its reflection in the quality of our polity. But let him not get too swayed by popular assessment. If necessary, point to him the critical role of representational democracy in the daily workings of our administration.

Point out to him, his own contribution to

the deepening of this discontent. This might be difficult, but try to hold a mirror to him. If he complains of being powerless, remind him of the enormous reach of the Indian state and his own pre-eminent position in it. Or, of the number of times he was able to get away with arrogant behaviour. If this does not help, suggest to him that perhaps he is too focused on the ones more powerful than him to have forgotten those millions whose lives he has the power to change. Ask him why he can't do what many of his colleagues elsewhere have



done to rid citizens of the curse of negotiated service from government. But be gentle. Don't be too harsh on him for the problem may lie not in his intentions but motivation.

Ask what motivates him. He may talk about uninspiring bosses, especially the ones that kiss up and kick down. He may mention the crushing weight of routine, endless meetings and the sheer boredom of being in a stifling environment. He will perhaps talk about the crippling effect of

an unimaginative promotion policy, fear of inquiries, motivated or otherwise, and a non-transparent handling of personnel matters. Be honest with him. Do not minimise the importance of these and others that he might mention. And do not offer glib solutions. Seek his patience for those at the top, who are working at this complex task, are perhaps yet to hit the right buttons. To him, you ask if he is himself doing enough about these very things to keep high the motivation of those working for him. Finally, take him, during night, to the India that sleeps on pavements and, during day, to the India that sends her children to beg. Ask him: Is working for these people not motivation enough?

Engage him on the big-ticket issues of the day — the gathering angst in large parts of India, dying hope among farmers in many areas, crushing burden of social exclusion on our women and others, market exclusion of those who most need it, embarrassing state of our health and education delivery systems, sharing fruits from zones of growth opportunities. Engage him on these and other such critical issues.

But be careful on how you do it and whose help you take. Focused and energetic conversations with eminent personalities and not long drawn monologues should be your goal. Throw him with experts and others in small groups to pool their heads to find solutions to the many problems of public administration. If you have foreign experts and management gurus talking to him, remember to also find people who will help him adapt those lessons to the world of the IAS. That world with its peculiar incentive structure, complex socio-political terrain, idiosyncratic players, unique institutional matrix and rich intra-IAS dynamics is not amenable to comprehension easily except by serious students of Indian socio-political landscape.

Draw upon the reservoir of Indian public intellectuals and others who, if credibly approached, will do this for the love of their country. This is a fairly large and demanding agenda. Do what best you can. But know that it is important for the country that you do this right. Good luck.

The writer is an IAS officer. Views are personal.